

Elements of Communication: Physical Expression

Curriculum by Eliza Ladd Schwarz

1. Introduction:

1. The goals of this workshop are:

- to provide the participants with an experience of the powers of physical communication
- to enhance awareness of how we communicate non-verbally
- to discover what our individual physical habits are
- to practice working in physical relationship with each other
- to experience what happens to us physically when we express in front of an audience
- to articulate observations about physical expression
- to free our selves physically

2. The principles of this workshop are:

- the work is participatory and experiential, everyone gets on their feet
- an actor/audience relationship is used to heighten the stakes of the exercises
- an atmosphere of play, discovery, observation, awareness, and specificity rather than judgment is cultivated
- the participants and their experiences of the exercises provide most of the content discussed

2. Structure of Workshop:

1. Observing Entrances:

The facilitator introduces herself to the group and then explains that she will make three entrances into the room each ending when she has sat on the chair. The participants are asked to observe as closely as possible and to remember details of what they have seen.

The facilitator acts out the three contrasting entrances communicating only with the body, personal belongings, and use of space. Three examples of entering characters are 1) the scared indecisive, high breath, tippy toed, lowered eyes skittish one, 2) the angry, loud, bang

door, swagger, throw bag, lean on table, toe tapping sisher, and 3) the present, normal look around room, meet eyes, smile nod, prepared one.

After each entrance the participants jot down notes of what they have observed. After all three entrances, the group and facilitator discuss them, giving each a title/name and listing descriptive characteristics on the blackboard. The experience of physical communication has occurred, been noticed, and we discuss what the ramifications of different physical expressions are. For instance what was it like to have the character sigh and moan and throw bag? What do darting lowered eyes communicate? Of course these are caricatures, but the broad point that our bodies are communicating, and how, has been observed and discussed.

An opportunity can be given to any participant to create a fourth character entrance and for the group to discuss that character.

2. Walk This Way:

A. Having observed the facilitator, the participants are now asked to get up on their feet. Half of the group becomes actors (doers) and the other half are the audience, the observers, receivers, and people who give feedback. Every participant plays both roles.

The participants are guided to walk the room as they normally do and then to shift their walk according to the facilitator's directions. The first series of directions are primarily physical shifts, for example: walk with your feet turned out, walk with your chest collapsed, walk with a nervous tick in some part of your body, walk holding your breath, walk with your butt clenched, walk with your eyes darting. Between each assumed walk the participants return to their normal walk. After a good amount of physical shifting the group discusses what has happened. The participants are asked what they experienced when walking in a shifted way and the audience shares details of what they saw. The participants are also asked what they notice about their own normal walk. The groups switch so each has the opportunity to be the actor and the audience. The participants have now had a physical experience of being up in front of others, playing with shifting their bodies, and perhaps noticing how that shift affects their internal state as well as what they are communicating externally. They are also developing a sharpened ability to read the bodies of others, as well as their own.

B. In the second stage of 'Walk This Way' the facilitator asks the participants, in half groups, or three or four at a time, to shift their conditions, meaning their whole state of being, internal and external, according to directions such as: you just won the lottery, you are late to your grandmothers house for dinner. you are outside in January without a coat. your net just

your grandmothers house for dinner, you are outside in January without a coat, your pet just died, you just found out you got the job you wanted. These directions ask the participants to create whatever expression seems appropriate to them in response to the condition offered. They experiment with using their bodies, walks, and non-verbal sounds to respond to the directions and inhabit the conditions. Between each direction they return to normal walking. They can also be asked to freeze in a condition, in a sculpture, allowing the audience time to discuss what they see, or to articulate the story of the frozen sculpture of that particular condition. Throughout this exercise the participants need to be encouraged to exaggerate, for we are not communicating normally here, but rather we are putting a telescope onto the powers of physical communication. We are seeing how much can be communicated physically while also freeing up our capacity to communicate. The students are also being asked to articulate the stories that are in bodies -- what do you see? what is this body saying? How do you interpret it? Of course, many different stories can emerge from one sculpture.

3. Text Experiment:

The facilitator demonstrates speaking a simple phrase such as "It Won't Work" in three different ways. The same text is spoken, but the body, feeling, intention, and meaning are different. The participants are asked to write down a few simple phrases. The facilitator chooses a phrase, tells it to three volunteers who then stand up with their backs to the group. One at a time they turn around saying the phrase making sure that their version is completely different from the previous participants expression of the same phrase. Everyone has a chance to be up in front of the group working with a small phrase. This exercise provides an experience of how the words themselves are only one element of the whole communication. The same words can be communicated in many different ways, and therefore, communication is a lot more than words. What we are saying gets expressed in many languages, one of them being the words.

4. Physical Warm-Up:

Having established the power of physical communication, the facilitator now leads the group through a physical warm up. This is a time to both notice things about what we do, our physical habits, as well as experiment with freeing expression. It is also a time to focus on becoming present with each other.

A. The group stands in a circle and one person makes a vocal sound. The sound is

A. The group stands in a circle and one person makes a vocal sound. The sound is passed as in a wave around the circle. The object is to copy the sound as best you can and pass the sound as quickly as possible. Once the sound has made the complete circle, the next person initiates a contrasting sound, which is then passed. This same structure is repeated a few times, and then it is done with a movement instead of a sound. Finally the group attempts to pass a sound and movement expressed simultaneously by one person and then passed around the circle. All through this exercise the facilitator encourages the participants that there is no wrong expression, to inhabit their expression as best they can, and to be ready and present to not drop the ball, or sound and movement. Exaggeration is encouraged.

B. In the circle the facilitator leads the group through a standing and aligning exercise. The participants are guided to stand in "Neutral" -- feet parallel, hip width apart, easy knees (slight bend), pelvis dropped (not tucked or pulled back), weight on the whole foot, torso on top of the pelvis and legs, arms dropped. We play with this stance attempting to find a center place. We roll down our spines head dropped to chest first, then vertebra by vertebra until the torso hangs over off the legs. All the while we pay attention to staying centered on one's feet and legs and keeping easy knees. We slowly roll back up. This exercise is just a beginning experience of staying centered and balanced in oneself while also breathing, and noticing what one's habits are.

C. The final component to the physical warm up is a hands on exercise. The participants get in partners and one sits cross legged in front of the other standing. The standing participant uses their hands to trace along the spine of the sitting partner, helping them with breath and touch to become aware of their own spine. The standing partner then does the "elephant walk" on their partners trapezius muscle, using their own weight, breath, and presence to help release tension in this muscle. The partners then give each other verbal feedback and then switch roles. This exercise is designed to release tension and encourage presence through the process of actual physical contact, communication, and relationship.

5. Obstacle Course:

In this exercise the participants are asked to find ways to guide each other through an obstacle course that can be set up in the room with chairs, desks, and bags. There are various ways to set up the task of guiding, giving directions, and following directions.

A. One participant has back to course and an other guides by using words only.

B. One participant has back to the course and another guides by using gesture only, no words.

C. One participant is blindfolded and an other guides with words only.

D. One participant is blindfolded and an other guides physically, with their own body, and no words.

Throughout the various versions of this exercise the participants are encouraged to be as specific and clear as possible with their directions. The exercise addresses issues that come up when we work in relationship with others as well as how able we are at finding various ways of communicating. All are encouraged to give feedback and articulate their experiences and observations.

6. Blind Fold Relationship:

The group divides into partners. One person blindfolds themselves and places their hand on the shoulder of their partner. The seeing partner takes their blindfolded partner on an adventure around the room, floor, or building. The directions are to be back in five minutes and that it is your job to take care of your partner. Without discussing the exercise the partners switch roles and repeat.

The whole group reconvenes and can either discuss out loud or write individually and then discuss outloud what it was like to be the leader and to be the follower. Was it safe? Was made it easy or difficult to trust? What did you notice about your behavior in each role? What were you aware of having the sense of sight taken away? This exercise is a physical experience of the relationships of leading, following, and teamwork that occur in the workplace and academic world. What can we see and learn about what we do?

7. Sculpture Tableaus:

In groups of three, four, or five the participants are asked to create a sculpture tableau based on a particular theme. Each group receives a theme from the facilitator and has five minutes to work as a group to create their tableau. Some example themes for tableaus are: balance, flow, pressure, gravity, efficiency, relationship, solution. Each group prepares simultaneously and then one group at a time shows their tableau to the rest of the group. The sculptors use their physical communication skills as well as their team skills in order to create and share their tableau. The audience uses their keen observation of physical communication skills to discuss what the theme of the tableau might be. What is being communicated? How?

skills to discuss what the theme of the tableau might be. What is being communicated? How? The exercise provides the group with a culminating actor/audience experience in which physical expression, teamwork, and observation all play a role.

8. Feedback:

The group discusses out loud or writes individually about their experience of the workshop. In what ways do the issues addressed relate to academic and or work life?